

## A SOCIAL THEORY OF CULTURAL CHANGE

John Howland Rowe  
University of California, Berkeley

### Introductory Note

This paper was written for the First Annual Meeting of the Kroeber Anthropological Society, held in Berkeley on May 18, 1957. Its publication has been delayed because I wanted time to do some more thinking about the subject and discuss it further with friends interested in cultural change. The thought and discussion of five years has had the effect of increasing my confidence in the value of the argument, at least as a productive stimulus to discussion. It would be tempting to undertake a revision based on wider reading, but such an undertaking would require a further delay in publication. The paper is therefore presented substantially as it was read in 1957 with only minor editorial changes.

The relationship of imitation to social hierarchy which is explored here was the subject of two earlier papers which I learned about only after mine was written (Fallers, 1954, and Srinivas, 1956). The second was kindly called to my attention by Edward B. Harper. Eugene A. Hammel, who was partly responsible for the formulation of the argument presented here, has done a field investigation of some of its implications which carries the matter a step further (Hammel, 1962). - J.H.R.

\* \* \*

One of the most interesting theoretical developments in modern archaeology is the general acceptance by archaeologists of the assumption that all cultures change. I am not aware that this assumption has been stated by anyone in so many words, but it is obvious enough in archaeological practice. When an archaeologist today starts work in a previously unknown area he looks for and expects to find a "sequence of cultures," no matter where he is working. All his methods of dating depend ultimately on the determination of changes in culture. Changes in culture have now been found in so many parts of the world that it seems to be a reasonable expectation that they will eventually be found everywhere.

The assumption that all cultures change does not, of course, imply any corollary that the rate of change is constant or that all cultures change at the same rate. We now have numerous dated examples in which no change can be traced in the archaeological record over a period of several centuries or even millenia. Even in such cases, however, some change ultimately takes place. The general rule seems to be that the more abundant and varied the archaeological record is the more frequent the changes that can be traced. It therefore seems likely that the apparent lack of change over long periods in some cultural traditions is as much a reflection of the poverty of the surviving cultural inventory as an indication of real cultural stability.

The assumption that all cultures change poses some interesting theoretical problems. Without indulging in the reductionism of seeking a psychological

explanation for this phenomenon, we can legitimately look for reasons on a social and cultural level which may provide at least a partial explanation for what seems to be a general characteristic of human behavior.

The problem of explaining cultural change recommended itself for discussion in a seminar on culture change and stability which I offered at the University of California in the fall semester of 1956. The discussion group based on this seminar consisted of Frank B. Bessac, Gordon L. Grosscup, Eugene A. Hammel, Dorothy Menzel, Ann M. Norsworthy, Octavio Romano, Robert J. Squier, and myself. This group succeeded in formulating several promising ideas, one of which is the subject of this paper. This particular idea grew out of a discussion of the role of social prestige in culture change. I am especially indebted to Eugene A. Hammel and Ann M. Norsworthy for help in expanding and refining it.

In his Les lois de l'imitation (1890, 1895, 1903) Gabriel Tarde repeatedly makes the point that, in a stable social hierarchy, the direction of influence is from the top down, people of less prestige imitating those with more prestige. He compares the movement of influence to a cascade (1895, pp. 92, 396-397). Tarde does not rule out the possibility of a trickle of influence in the other direction, but he is confident that the usual direction of influence is down the scale. In its simplest form, Tarde's generalization may be restated as follows:

In a social hierarchy, people of less prestige imitate the behavior of those with more prestige oftener than people of more prestige imitate the behavior of people with less.

For convenience of reference, I am proposing to refer to this proposition hereafter as "Tarde's Law."

Tarde's discussion of the "Law" recognizes its obvious corollary:

Since imitation necessarily involves the movement of traits, behavior traits move downward in a social hierarchy more often than they move upward.

It is the downward movement of traits which Tarde compares to a cascade. In fact, it is not hard to find examples of behavior traits which must have moved down the social scale because they were formerly characteristic of an upper class group and are now found only on the lowest social levels. The poncho, for instance, was introduced into highland Peru in the first half of the eighteenth century as a garment worn by upper class Spanish horsemen. It is now the distinctive dress of the lowest social levels of the Inca-speaking population. On the other hand, it is much harder to find examples of behavior traits which have moved upward. There are some qualifications to this statement which will be discussed later.

Tarde's Law and its corollary describe one type of cultural change: change involving the redistribution of traits already present in the cultural system of a given social hierarchy. But we can now go further than Tarde did. In the first place, there are some limitations to the operation of Tarde's Law.

Some behavior traits are more easily imitated by people on a lower social level than others. If, for example, social prestige is correlated with wealth, behavior traits like the ownership of large tracts of land are not likely to move downward in the hierarchy because people of lower status are not economically in any position to imitate this aspect of the behavior of the high prestige

group. On the other hand, patterns of clothing, manners, linguistic peculiarities, songs, dances, and stories can be copied with relative ease by anyone. It is behavior of the more easily imitated type which comes most often within the scope of Tarde's Law.

Another limitation on Tarde's Law is suggested by the generalization that,

In a social hierarchy, some features of customary behavior are identified with social position and serve to symbolize it.

It is these particular features which are most likely to move down the social scale through prestige imitation. It may be noted that it is more convenient for a high prestige group to have, as behavior symbolic of its status, traits which are relatively difficult to imitate rather than ones which are relatively easy. This factor may explain in part the widespread emphasis on lineage and property in social hierarchies around the world.

Behavior traits which symbolize primarily local or professional groups, age grades, sex differences, factions, and so forth, may also serve indirectly as symbols of social position, for the groups they distinguish generally form social hierarchies. Thus, age differences are the basis of one scale of prestige and sex differences of another. Prestige imitation takes place within each scale according to Tarde's Law. Thus, in the United States, women can imitate men's dress but men cannot imitate women's dress.

Closely analogous to the specialized type of prestige imitation just discussed is imitation between communities. Certain settlements have more prestige than others. The fact that a settlement is noted for some special activity, product, or historical association may confer prestige, usually in a limited sphere. More general prestige seems to be correlated with the gross size of the settlement, except when a settlement has undergone a sudden increase or decrease of population and its prestige status has not had time to adjust to the new size. Thus, a town has more prestige than a village and a city has more prestige than a town. One reason for the greater prestige of larger settlements may be that the larger the settlement the greater the range of the local social hierarchy occupying it and the higher the social position of the upper levels. In most of Latin America, at any rate, "high society" groups are found only in the larger cities, and the professional people who generally form the next social level are more numerous and better off in the cities than in the towns. The most respected doctors and lawyers, for example, are found in the cities, though there may be some doctors and lawyers in small towns as well.

Tarde's Law works between settlements as well as between individuals or social groups. As the urban geographers have noted, every city has a "hinterland," an area in which its cultural influence dominates all towns and smaller settlements. Southern Colombia, for example, was part of the cultural hinterland of Quito in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Street names, churches, festivals, and many other features were copied from Quito by the southern Colombian towns during this period. These old borrowings are conspicuous because the prestige relations have been substantially reversed in more modern times.

Prestige, and hence imitation, relationships may exist between nations or societies which are otherwise independent of one another. It is a commonplace observation that France dominated Europe in prestige and as a model for imitation in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, for example. At an earlier period the Byzantine Empire exercised a similar cultural domination beyond its borders in southeast Europe and the eastern Mediterranean.

Tarde, and a number of living anthropologists, have noted that traits once characteristic of prestigious countries are preserved in ones of less prestige, and traits which began in influential cities can be found surviving in remote villages. This situation parallels the one we found operating within a social hierarchy of individuals.

So far, we have explored the implications of Tarde's Law for the redistribution of existing traits within a prestige system and gone on to extend the principle beyond its effect in a single social hierarchy. If two or more social hierarchies are in contact and differential prestige relations are set up between them, we can expect that cultural borrowing will take place and that the direction of influence will be from the unit of greater prestige to that of less prestige. Since it is generally the people on the higher social levels who have the best opportunity to travel and establish foreign contacts, much of the borrowing is likely to be on a high social level.

Prestige, then, in all systems of human relations, is acknowledged by imitation and borrowing of traits of behavior. The very existence of prestige difference, therefore, seems to be a sufficient condition of cultural change.

We can go one step further. In any given social hierarchy social position is symbolized by behavior, as we have said. Now, if the behavior of the people at the top of the hierarchy did not change while people lower down on the scale imitated it, the symbolic advantage of the people at the top would be progressively reduced. To maintain their symbolic advantage, people at the top of the hierarchy must adopt new behavior traits different from those of the people immediately below them. They can get the new behavior traits by outright invention, by borrowing them from another social hierarchy, by reviving obsolete traits, or even by taking up traits characteristic of a social level so far below them that they feel that it offers no danger to their position. They must, however, get new traits from some source in order to maintain the system. Thus, a prestige system operates as a mechanism for stimulating invention as well as imitation.

There are two questions raised by the foregoing discussion which may require comment. One is the relationship of the prestige theory outlined to the social situation in the United States, and the other is the effect of revolutionary movements.

I interpret United States society as consisting not of a single social hierarchy but of many. In fact, our society is quite deliberately organized to encourage and reward as many individuals as possible by providing many different kinds of prestige which are not correlated with one another. A bank clerk with no hope of social advancement in his profession may become a fine golf player or reach a position of honor in his lodge. In this type of social system the

pattern of prestige and imitation is naturally very much more complicated than it is in a simple class system in which there is only one prestige scale. Within each social hierarchy the patterns which we have described will be found to hold, however.

Social revolution can be defined very neatly in terms of prestige theory as a situation in which individuals of relatively low social status who are not entitled to high prestige positions under the existing rules nevertheless succeed in occupying them. A coup d'etat, in which no change in the social hierarchy occurs, is not a revolution in this sense. A social revolution must be carried out at the expense of the people already occupying the high prestige positions, so these people are the natural enemies of the revolutionists. In order to consolidate their position, the revolutionists must set up a new social hierarchy and a new prestige scale in which they can impose a subordinate position on their late rivals. It is natural for them to seek new behavior traits as prestige symbols, and hence all revolutions which qualify under my definition are occasions for wholesale innovation. If the revolutionary movement has strong support from one of the lower social levels, it may be convenient for the revolutionary leaders to try to give social prestige to certain behavior traits characteristic of the social position of their supporters, thus creating an exception to the orderly operation of Tarde's Law. It may be noted that "revolution" in this sense does not need to be a political movement. In his own particular social hierarchy, Elvis Presley was a revolutionary.

Our exploration of the effects of social prestige on cultural patterns has thus provided us with exactly the explanation that we needed for the phenomenon of constant cultural change. Wherever we find a social hierarchy we must expect change to occur. It remains to be determined whether all human societies consist of hierarchies in this sense, but a very large number of them certainly do.

It is also worth noting that this theory explains only the fact of change. It does not require that the change be in any particular direction or order and is thus not an evolutionary theory in the usual sense. The question of order in culture change is another problem altogether.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Fallers, Lloyd A.

1954 A note on the "trickle effect." *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 3, Fall, pp. 314-321. Princeton.

Hammel, Eugene A.

1962 Wealth, authority and prestige in the Ica Valley, Peru. *University of New Mexico Publications in Anthropology*, no. 10. Albuquerque.

Srinivas, Mysore Narasimhachar

1956 A note on Sanskritization and Westernization. *Far Eastern Quarterly*, vol. XV, no. 4, August, pp. 481-496. Ann Arbor.

Tarde, Gabriel

- 1890 Les lois de l'imitation; étude sociologique. Félix Alcan, Editeur, Paris.
- 1895 Les lois de l'imitation; étude sociologique. Seconde édition, revue et augmentée. Félix Alcan, Editeur, Paris.
- 1903 The laws of imitation. Translated from the second French edition by Elsie Clews Parsons, with an introduction by Franklin H. Giddings. Henry Holt and Company, New York.